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The Korean War Never Happened:

Forgetting a Conflict in

British Society and Culture

Abstract

This article traces the social and cultural significance of the Korean War in contemporary British society, from the initial involvement of British military forces in July 1950 to the unveiling of the first London memorial dedicated to the conflict in December 2014. In particular it explores why the Korean War has been labelled the ‘forgotten war’ of the twentieth century. After an initial surge of concern over the prospect of another world war in the summer of 1950, the Korean War was largely viewed as a distant war on a little-known peninsula and was continually obscured by the memory of the Second World War. Korea continued to be excluded from British national identity and memorial culture into the twentieth century as, unlike the Second World War, it served no purpose to subsequent generations. Moreover, the mantle of the ‘forgotten war’ had a discernible impact on how British veterans of Korea wrote about their experiences and understood their identity as post-1945 servicemen. Using letters, diaries and opinion surveys, as well as contemporary newspaper and television material, this article details how the Korean War was understood in twentieth-century and (early twenty-first-century) British culture. Moreover, this article calls for a wider reappraisal of ‘forgotten voices’ literature in twentieth-century British history writing and a clearer definition of the meaning of ‘forgetting’ to British society and culture.

Keywords: Korean War, Cold War, Memory, Forgetting

Introduction

In his self-published memoir former National Service conscript Ron Larby, wrote:

Everything and everybody connected with ... Korea just simply sank out of sight. Years went by during which time I never met anyone who had served in Korea. There were no books in the library and no films about Korea. There was nothing. It was as though it – the Korean War – had never happened. A truly forgotten war.¹

Popular history has an abundant supply of books claiming to recover the forgotten voices of modern warfare. First-person narratives from little-known conflicts, overlooked theatres of operation, domestic contexts or rank-and-file servicemen are all depicted as ‘forgotten’.² One might even argue that labelling such groups as ‘forgotten’ is little more than a helpful publishing strategy. But forgetting plays an important part in history-writing. Reinstating ‘forgotten voices’ into the historical narrative has been a central feature of social history since at least the 1960s and the lure of recovering lost stories has underpinned the historical discipline since French historian Jules Michelet delved into the archives in the early nineteenth century.³ Important questions remain about why particular events and figures have been ‘forgotten’ in the first place and what it means when a society ‘forgets’ moments in its history. In the case of Korea, why has Britain, a country whose national identity was intimately concerned with war and the military during the twentieth century, remained largely ambivalent toward a conflict that saw the mass involvement of around 40,000 British servicemen and the death of over 1,000 of them?

The Korean War (1950–3) has become *the* forgotten war of modern Britain: from memoirs, popular histories and (rare) television programmes, the term ‘forgotten war’ is synonymous with Korea in Anglophone culture. The media surrounding the unveiling in December 2014 of the first London memorial dedicated to Korea continued to use its infamous ‘forgotten’ label.⁴ Cold War historian David French has argued that the entire post-1945 army remains one of the most ‘forgotten’ in history.⁵ The impact of the Second World War was pivotal in hastening this process of forgetting. Building on the

¹ Ron Larby, *Signals to the Right, Armoured Corps to the Left* (Leamington Spa, 1993), 174–5.

² Max Arthur, *Forgotten Voices of the Great War* (London, 2003); Max Arthur, *Forgotten Voices of the Second World War* (London, 2004); Roderick Bailey, *Forgotten Voices of the Victoria Cross* (London, 2010); Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: the Fall of British Asia 1941–5* (London, 2004); Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War: Myths and Realities* (London, 2002).

³ Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester, 2001), 69–70.

⁴ Joe Shute, ‘Britain’s Korean War veterans win their final fight’, *Telegraph*, 29 November 2014.

⁵ David French, *Empire, Army and Cold War* (Oxford, 2012), 1–2.

arguments of James Hinton, Geoff Eley and Richard Vinen, this article argues that the Korean War was eclipsed even at the time by the memory of the 1939-1945 conflict.⁶ The British population, after an initial rush of fear in the summer of 1950 (partially concerned with the potential use of atomic weapons) became largely ambivalent towards the distant war in Korea. The ambiguous war aims of the Korean War, its distance from the UK and its unsatisfactory conclusion similarly contributed to its ‘forgotten’ status. Although many servicemen tried to evoke Second World War ideas of duty, being an ‘underdog’ and protecting the world from tyranny, the Korean War never came close to it in the national imagination. Neither did it provoke the level of opposition that was later seen against the Vietnam War: although the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), elements of the Trade Union movement and many left-wing intellectuals opposed the conflict, it never inspired the same levels of mass opposition, on either side of the Atlantic.

Korea continued to be excluded from British national identity and memorial culture later in the twentieth century as, unlike the Second World War, it served no use to subsequent generations. Aside from re-runs of *M*A*S*H*, the Korean War rarely featured on British television in the latter half of the twentieth century; the most famous fictional veteran of the conflict – the haphazard hotelier Basil Fawlty – was renowned for reasons other than his military service.⁷ Unlike the Second World War or the Vietnam War, Korea was neither lauded nor vilified in British culture. Furthermore, Korea has rarely featured in the social history of the period. British historian David Kynaston’s research largely focuses on the economic consequences of the war in his study of the post-war Labour government. Elsewhere, David Edgerton, whose book *Warfare State* (2006) puts forward the argument that Britain’s economy was still geared up for war – not welfare – after 1945, makes little mention of Korea.⁸ Korea is frequently mentioned in histories of the post-war period alongside the introduction of health services

⁶ James Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives: Mass Observation and the Making of the Modern Self* (Oxford, 2010), 1; Geoff Eley, ‘Finding the People’s War: Film, British Collective Memory, and World War II’, *American Historical Review*, 106, 3 (2001), 818-9; Richard Vinen, *National Service: Conscription in Britain 1945-63* (London, 2014), xxiv.

⁷ *M*A*S*H* was a long-running television programme (1972-1983), based on a 1969 film of the same name and followed exploits of a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (US Army) in Korea; Basil Fawlty was the title character of the BBC television series *Fawlty Towers* (1975-1979).

⁸ David Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain 1920-70* (New York, 2006), 5.

charges in 1951 (to cover the costs of rearmament).⁹ Minister of Health Aneurin Bevan famously resigned in opposition.¹⁰ Yet these fleeting, almost clichéd, references show we have tended to regard the Korean War as an ill-fitting part of the history of the welfare state, rather than analysing it as part of the complex legacy of the Second World War, the emerging anxieties associated with the Cold War and the end of empire. As a result it has sunk into relative cultural obscurity during the second half of the twentieth century.

However, Korea’s status as a forgotten war has had an enduring impact on those who served there. Faced with seeming apathy from younger generations, veterans like Larby have sought out one another. Larby argued that the British Korea Veterans Association (BKVA) filled the void of wider popular remembrance. His memoir was even produced by a small publishing company, run by another veteran which focused solely on veteran memoirs. He and others were therefore able to find the recognition which he sought in veterans’ and regimental organizations. This article examines responses to the ‘forgotten war’ from veteran memoirists and analyzes how they viewed their experiences and role in the post-1945 British Army.

The case of Korea also shows how forgetting is a vital component in understanding post-war societies. Feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe has argued how post-war periods are ‘fraught with gendered decisions’ about which ‘selected images’ are privileged over others.¹¹ Such analysis is timely: the commemoration of the one hundredth anniversary of the First World War, a monumental four-year cycle of public events, memorials and varied cultural outputs, has prompted historians to ask once again *why* certain events are remembered, why others are forgotten and the immense influence of the World Wars in shaping British culture and identity. The mnemonic turn in history-writing since the 1980s certainly raised such questions before, but the case of the Korean War sheds further light on the politics and practicalities of remembrance in post-1945 Britain.

⁹ David Kynaston, *Family Britain 1951-57* (London, 2010), 80; Peter Hennessey, *Having it So Good: Britain in the Fifties* (London, 2007), 219.

¹⁰ Aneurin Bevan, *In Place of Fear* (Weybridge, 2008), 129.

¹¹ Cynthia Enloe, ‘Women after wars: puzzles and meanings’, in Kathleen Barry (ed.), *Vietnam’s Women in Transition* (New York, 1996), 313.

Although largely beyond the scope of this article, the interpretive aftermath of the Korean War also runs in parallel with end of the British Empire. During the last decade, the so-called ‘minimal impact’ thesis (arguing that the end of empire had little impact on British culture) has been questioned by historians including Stuart Ward, Joanna Bailkin and Bill Schwarz. As historians continue to ascertain the cultural impact of foreign affairs on twentieth-century British citizens, it is vital to defragment the processes of cultural valorization, public opinion and memory even further. For instance, Schwarz argues that Powellism (stemming from the views of Conservative MP Enoch Powell in the late 1960s) was a curious mix of the public wishing to forget and being unable to forget.¹² Elsewhere, David Anderson describes intentional acts of forgetting, or rather *silencing*, through the purposeful destruction of certain files relating to British counter-insurgency tactics in Kenya. In destroying this archive, Anderson argues that colonial officials were seeking ‘to edit, to sanitize and to censor history.’¹³ Forgetting thus has many variants and has had a longstanding and powerful impact on modern British history.

Understanding the significance of the Korean War and its aftermath is also pivotal in analysing Britain’s Cold War history: Robert Barnes recently argued that the Korean War was no longer forgotten, at least not by the academic community.¹⁴ Although this is increasingly the case, few analyses have contextualized the Korean War within a British domestic context or address its significance to people’s lives. This may be due to the difficulty in mapping the Cold War’s impact on Britain, oscillating as it did between short-lived panics and longer-term low-level anxieties. But an analysis of Britain and the Korean War can add not only to our understanding of post-war British history, but also adds to our broader conceptualisation of the Cold War. As Geoff Eley has argued, the ‘exorbitantly conventional binary framework’ that we have used traditionally to characterise post-war Europe falters when we examine the Cold War in greater detail; it becomes a set of far ‘messier contingencies’.¹⁵ The

¹² Bill Schwarz, *White Man’s World* (Oxford, 2011), 9.

¹³ David Anderson, ‘Guilty secrets: deceit, denial and the discovery of Kenya’s “migrated archive”’, *History Workshop Journal*, 80 (2015), 142.

¹⁴ Robert Barnes, ‘Introduction’, in Robert Barnes (ed.), *The Korean War at Sixty: New Approaches to the Study of the Korean War* (Abingdon, 2012), 1.

¹⁵ Geoff Eley, ‘Corporatism and the social democratic moment: the post war settlement, 1945-1973’ in Dan Stone (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Post-War European History* (Oxford, 2012), 37.

‘forgotten war’ of modern British history demonstrates the Cold War’s complexities powerfully, both in a national and international setting. This article will first explore the historical approaches to forgetting, before briefly setting out the Korean War’s significance within British social history and contemporary attitudes towards it during the war itself, before examining in detail how the Korean War became ‘forgotten’. This article finishes with an analysis of veteran writing and how being forgotten became an identity of its very own. The Korean War thus shows the entwined processes of national identity, memory and forgetting at work in the second half of the twentieth century and its ‘forgotten voices’ demonstrate the complexity of Cold War culture in Britain and its legacy today.

Forgetting Twentieth-Century Conflict

Since Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) historians have explored the relationship between war and memory in great detail. The vast literature produced since the 1980s has accelerated this interest, particularly following Pierre Nora’s now seminal *Realms of Memory* (1996).¹⁶ Within this mnemonic turn, forgetting is largely interpreted as the inverse or *absence* of remembering. Paul Ricoeur describes forgetting as an ever-present *fear*, lurking behind all memory projects: he calls forgetting ‘[a]n attack, a weakness, a lacuna’.¹⁷ Similarly, in their fascinating study of the material culture of remembrance, Adrian Forty and Susanne Küchler largely interpret forgetting as the opposite or failure of remembrance: particular objects denote remembrance, their *destruction* a desire to forget.¹⁸ This does not mean that the process of remembrance, in contrast, is less complicated. Forty and Küchler’s collection shows how, in the case of war memorials for instance, certain groups are excluded in favour of others. Nor are remembrance and forgetting divorced processes. As Jenny Edkins has argued commemoration can hasten forgetting: memorialising stories of heroism and glory obscure trauma, suffering and a wide range of other counter-narratives of conflict.¹⁹

¹⁶ Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Construction of the French Past Vol. 1* (Columbia, 1996).

¹⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History and Forgetting* (Chicago and London, 2006), 413.

¹⁸ Adrian Forty and Susanne Küchler (eds), *The Art of Forgetting* (Oxford and New York, 1999), 8-10.

¹⁹ Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge, 2003), 54.

However, Freud argued that forgetting is not just an absence of memory: it is a deliberate act, executed by an individual or society – to construct a more comfortable narrative of their lives and to remove traumatic episodes which impede their daily psychic existence.²⁰ Forgetting in this instance can be a powerful, purposeful act. Forgetting can encompass both the personal repression of painful events and the deliberate destruction or omission of unpalatable episodes in a society’s history. According to this interpretation, forgetting can even be equated with silencing or erasing, rather than just an unintentional failure of memory. Memory scholar Paul Connerton has described this forgetting as ‘repressive erasure’, the first of seven types of forgetting.²¹ Like memory, forgetting also changes over time, according to the varying needs and motivations of individuals and societies. In his recent study of digital ‘forgetting’ Viktor Mayer-Schönberger has shown that technology now makes remembering (not forgetting) the default – the 2015 debates in the European Court of Justice over internet search histories and the ‘right to forget’ illustrate this.²² This is not necessarily a new line of thought: Plato made a comparable argument about how writing would change human memory.²³ Nevertheless, digital technology has given forgetting a pressing importance. Indeed, Tony Judt has remarked that twenty-first-century policymakers ‘wear the last century rather lightly’ and that forgetting is a hallmark of contemporary life.²⁴

Historians too are deeply aware of the importance of forgetting. Michael Roth maintains that any examination of the past inevitably comes into confrontation with the ‘forces of forgetting’.²⁵ As Carolyn Steedman has argued, uncovering ‘forgotten’ items is central to the historian’s work and their view of themselves: ‘To enter that place where the past lives, where ink on parchment can be made to *speak*, still remains the social historian’s dream’: in short, the ‘lure of *finding it*’ drives historians.²⁶ E.P. Thompson’s famous introduction to *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), highlighting

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, ‘Remembering, repeating and working-through’ in J. Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, Vol. 12 (London, 1958), 148.

²¹ Paul Connerton, ‘Seven types of forgetting’, *Memory Studies*, 1, 1 (2008), 59–71.

²² Julia Powles and Enrique Chaparro, ‘How Google determined our right to be forgotten’, *Guardian*, 18 February 2015.

²³ Walter Ong, ‘Writing is a technology which restructures thought’, in Gerd Bauman (ed.), *The Written Word: Literacy in Translation* (Oxford, 1986), 27–31.

²⁴ Tony Judt, *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century* (London, 2009), 3.

²⁵ Michael S. Roth, ‘Trauma, representation and historical consciousness’, in Michael S. Roth, *Memory, Trauma and History* (New York, 2012), 83.

²⁶ Steedman, *Dust*, 70.

those previously excluded from the historical narrative, was not just a call to re-orientate the subjects a historian should study, but to *actively* ‘rescue’ historical subjects – through recording, archiving and cataloguing – in order to withstand the ‘condescension of posterity’. Peter Barham powerfully summarizes this process of retrieval in *Forgotten Lunatics of the Great War* (2004): ‘I was alerted to the existence of this population by a footnote from which it slowly dawned on me that here was a cultural mass grave, a “pauper’s pit” ... waiting to be excavated’.²⁷

On one level, the criteria for ‘forgotten’ status seem fairly clear. Typically it refers to a particular group or story that has been excluded from the dominant historical narrative or that provides an alternative dimension to that narrative. Barham describes the ‘forgotten lunatics’ as an ‘embarrassment’ to officials during the First World War and they remain ‘unjustly neglected’ to this day.²⁸ Restoring forgotten voices has thus been a profoundly political act: for example, David Hall notes in his study of working-class life that the current plight of post-industrial areas and working-class people might be taken more seriously if their experiences are more well-known.²⁹ Another assumption underpins such literature: that voices are best represented by first-person narrative. The Imperial War Museum’s highly successful ‘forgotten voices’ series offer short, first-person accounts of conflict, aiming to catalogue the ‘ordinary’ experiences of a wide range of men and women who witnessed some aspect of twentieth-century conflict. Its editor, Max Arthur, stated that ‘[t]hese are their words – I have been but a catalyst’.³⁰ Military historians John Keegan and Richard Holmes were influential in placing the first-hand narrative centre-stage in the emerging field of ‘new military history’. Keegan described his dissatisfaction with the study of weaponry, economics and generals ‘which, by its choice of focus, automatically distorts perspective and too often dissolves into sycophancy or hero-worship’.³¹ Holmes also took this stance, noting that military history reduces ‘one of the most passionate of dramas ... to a knockabout affair dripping with clichés ... [or] to a desensitised operational narrative in which the individual is lost in a welter of arrows on a map’.³² The emphasis on ‘voices’ also contrasted with

²⁷ Peter Barham, *Forgotten Lunatics of the Great War* (New Haven and London, 2004), 7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁹ David Hall, *Working Lives: the Forgotten Voices of Britain’s Post-War Working Class* (London, 2012), 10.

³⁰ Arthur, *Forgotten Voices of the Great War*, xii.

³¹ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme* (London, 1991), 27-9.

³² Richard Holmes, *Firing Line* (London, 1985), 6.

officially-commissioned military history, a practice beginning in 1908 where histories of conflicts were by illustrious military men or civil servants, in order to teach future generations about particular operations.

But given the complex meaning of forgetting, is its use in history-writing always justified? The Korean War was not the first, or indeed, the last war to be described as forgotten, not least because it has proven to be a successful publishing strategy (Arthur’s first book was a *Sunday Times* bestseller in 2003). Delving into something ‘forgotten’ implies that it has been untouched by historians and is therefore, somehow, more authentic. Arthur and others have used the word ‘raw’ or ‘speaking for themselves’ to describe first-person extracts used in his bestselling *Forgotten Voices* series.³³ But as Dan Todman points out, these forgotten voices were in fact ones left over from the highly popular programme *The Great War* (1964) and some of these voices (such as Charles Carrington) had hardly been side-lined or overlooked.³⁴ The centenary celebrations of the First World War suggest that the war is in fact the *least* forgotten of all modern conflicts. In other cases, the label seems more justified. The British Fourteenth Army fighting in Burma between 1942 and 1945 was referred to at the time and subsequently as the ‘forgotten army’, so side-lined were its actions. Yet the end of the Second World War proved a turning point in the remembrance of British involvement in war: as French argues, almost the entire military and its actions could be described as forgotten after 1945.³⁵ Why was this? French argues that post-1945 military engagements such as Malaya or Korea did not fit either with Britain’s vision of its own post-war domestic history nor its growing sense of its army as only a ‘humanitarian’ force. For instance, novelist Graham Greene once referred to the campaign against guerrillas in the Malayan Emergency (1946-60) as a ‘forgotten war’, one that saw the constant ‘dripping’ of casualties but never a decisive climax.³⁶

But, aside from the nature of post-1945 conflict, the forgotten wars of the late twentieth century also emanate from the legacy of the Second World War itself and a particular kind of forgetting that became prevalent. Connerton argues that forgetting can be ‘constitutive in the formation of a new

³³ Arthur, *Forgotten Voices of the Great War*, xii ; Tom Payne, ‘A writer’s life’, *Telegraph*, 8 November 2004.

³⁴ Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London, 2005), 211-12.

³⁵ French, *Empire, Army and Cold War*, 1.

³⁶ Graham Greene, ‘Malaya. The forgotten war’, *Life*, 31 July 1951, 51.

identity’.³⁷ In other words, forgetting is an essential part of constructing collective and individual identity: all ‘narrative[s] of modernity’ need to forget. In the case of Britain, identity formation in the second half of the twentieth century has certainly made use of conflict: war has been central to identity formation in twentieth-century Britain. Stephen McVeigh and Nicola Cooper argue that ‘[t]he soldier is a national avatar, a foundational figure and is evocative of the history, self-image and identity of the nation.’³⁸ Enloe has explored the gendered dimensions to such identity formation in post-war societies, noting that from museums to school reports, particular ‘presumptions about masculinity and femininity’ are being set out too.³⁹ Elsewhere, Raphael Samuel’s collection *Patriotism* (1989) sought to question the widespread association between national identity and the military, which Margaret Thatcher had attempted to claim as the preserve of the political right during and after the Falklands War (1982).⁴⁰ The Second World War continued to exert a powerful grasp over national memory for the remainder of the century. By contrast, the Korean War could not be used to support this notion of national identity. Rather than an ‘underdog’ triumphing over unquestionable ‘evil’, Britain had been a junior partner in a conflict whose aims, methods and outcomes had been at best unclear, at worst criticized.

The Korean War in British Social History

Before examining how Korea was excluded from national memory, it is important to understand the specific circumstances of the war itself, which ultimately contributed to its forgotten status. The Korean War was forgotten almost as soon as it began. From 1911 the Korean peninsula was occupied by the Japanese and, following the Japanese surrender in the summer of 1945, the United States (US) split Korea into two zones divided by the 38 Parallel North. The Moscow Agreement later that year stated that a provisional Korean government would be established, supported by the US, Soviet Union, Britain and People’s Republic of China (PRC), leading eventually to an independent Korea. However, the US

³⁷ Connerton, ‘Seven types of forgetting’, 63.

³⁸ Stephen McVeigh and Nicola Cooper, ‘Introduction: men after war’, in Stephen McVeigh and Nicola Cooper (eds), *Men after War* (New York and Abingdon, 2013), 3.

³⁹ Enloe, ‘Women after wars’, 313.

⁴⁰ Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Patriotism: the Making and Unmaking of British National Identity* (London, 1989).

and Soviet Union took different attitudes to the Communist uprising then taking place in Korea. The Soviets backed the revolutionary Kim Il Sung in their northern zone, whilst the US largely supported the right-wing stance of Syngman Rhee in the south. During the next few years, two politically divergent regimes developed on either side of the 38 Parallel – the Communist Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (ROK). Following rising tensions, on 25 June 1950 North Korea invaded South Korea and twenty-four nations offered armed or humanitarian support to South Korea and to a US-led United Nations (UN) force. By the autumn of 1950, China had entered the war to support North Korea and pushed back the initial UN advance. During the first year of the conflict troops moved up and down the peninsula repeatedly, with fighting concentrating around the Parallel from mid-1951, when fledgling peace negotiations began.

Britain was among the countries which formed the UN force. In July 1950 the Labour government (led by Clement Attlee) committed British naval and later land forces in defence of South Korea. An estimated 40,000 British servicemen (with an additional 60,000 from the wider Commonwealth) served in Korea and up to 50 per cent of some units were composed of National Servicemen, men aged between eighteen and twenty-one and conscripted for eighteen months (extended to two years in October 1950).⁴¹ They were dubbed by some MPs as ‘citizens in uniform’, but deemed ‘costly and inefficient’ by others.⁴² The National Servicemen were joined by recalled reservists from the Second World War and a small number of ‘K-Force’ volunteers from across the Commonwealth. Britain’s junior role in decision-making in Korea, to some extent contributed to its forgotten status: critics in particular pointed out that Britain was subject to the decisions of the US and to the UN. Winston Churchill’s Conservative government, which came to power in October 1951, wished to maintain the ‘special relationship’ that Churchill himself had engineered.⁴³ However, more recent historical research has shown that Britain in fact managed to exert influence at the UN and mediated

⁴¹ Gordon L. Rottman, *Korean War Order of Battle: United States, United Nations, and Communist Ground, Naval, and Air Forces, 1950-1953* (Westport, 2002), 126; Vinen, *National Service*, 285. Vinen notes that the official total was never released.

⁴² *Parliamentary Debates* (Commons) 512, 9 March 1953, 844–910; *Parliamentary Debates* (Commons), 472, 20 March 1950, 1559–622.

⁴³ Anonymous, ‘Mr Churchill on Korea’, *The Times*, 29 June 1950, 3; Anonymous, ‘Mr Churchill on Britain’s “enduring strength”’, *The Times*, 18 January 1952, 4.

some of the decisions of the US.⁴⁴ Britain had its own agenda and motivations for involvement. David Kynaston argues that the memory of 1930s appeasement had not faded and that the cabinet wished to support the US (and, as Sean Greenwood notes, their aid to post-war Europe).⁴⁵ Callum Macdonald adds that they also wished to promote the UN’s collective security principles and maintain British interests and ‘Commonwealth harmony’.⁴⁶ US policy in the Far East did, however, make consecutive British governments uneasy. Greenwood and Macdonald argue that both Labour and Conservative governments were keen, from long before the North Korean invasion, to mediate the US policy towards China. Policymakers in Britain had largely accepted that mainland China was now a Communist state and that the Chinese nationalists on the island of Formosa had no great political sway: in 1950 US Secretary of State Dean Acheson (1893–1971) had yet to be convinced that this was the case.⁴⁷

Korea and China were not, however, Britain’s only major foreign policy commitment at this time. 40,000 British troops were deployed in Malaya and the British Army were also present in Kenya (where the Mau Mau Rebellion was suppressed in 1952) and in Singapore. It is essential to analyse the British role in Korea in the context of decolonization, not only because of concomitant military manpower commitments, but also because many commentators at the time felt that Britain’s apparent skill at dealing with ‘satellite states’ would be helpful in Korea. In one BBC television programme from 1950 stated that the British could ‘claim some credit for being the first to see the magnitude of the problem’ in countries like India, Pakistan and Burma and had granted them independence as a result.⁴⁸

The initial press treatment of the Korean War similarly reflected on Britain’s mediating presence, particularly given the presence of more controversial figures in US and ROK leadership. One such figure was General Douglas MacArthur (1880–1964). He was initially been praised by some parts

⁴⁴ William Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History* (Princeton and Oxford, 2002), 129; Thomas Hennessey, *Britain’s Korean War: Cold War Diplomacy, Strategy and Security 1950–53* (Manchester, 2013), 3–4; Robert Barnes, ‘Branding an aggressor: the Commonwealth, the United Nations and Chinese intervention in the Korean War, November 1950 – January 1951’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 33, 2 (2010), 231–53.

⁴⁵ David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain, 1945–51* (London, 2008), 546; Sean Greenwood, “‘A war we don’t want’: another look at the British Labour government’s commitment in Korea, 1950–51”, *Contemporary British History*, 17, 4 (2003), 2.

⁴⁶ Callum Macdonald, *Korea: the War before Vietnam* (Basingstoke, 1986), 84.

⁴⁷ Sean Greenwood, *Britain and the Cold War* (Basingstoke and New York, 2000), 87; Callum Macdonald, *Britain and the Korean War* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA, 1990), 15; Macdonald, *Korea*, 22; Peter Lowe, *The Origins of the Korean War* (London and New York, 1986), 154.

⁴⁸ BBC Written Archive (BBC), Home News and Entertainment, ‘Korea in world politics’, 8 September 1950, S322/85/1.

of the press: one *Daily Mail* reporter called him the ‘man of today’ at the outbreak of war.⁴⁹ By April 1951, however, Labour Foreign Secretary Herbert Morrison (1888–1965) was concerned that Macarthur’s naval exercises off the coast of China, and his talk of atomic weaponry, would provoke the Chinese and reduce the likelihood of peace talks.⁵⁰ When Macarthur was dismissed later that month, having continued his quest to push beyond the 38 Parallel in April 1951, seemingly ignoring President Harry Truman’s wishes, *The Times* heralded Truman’s action as courageous.⁵¹ Popular opinion was similarly critical of South Korea’s leader, President Rhee (1875–1965). The vehemence of anti-Rhee sentiment in Britain in 1950 has been overlooked by some popular historians of the Korean War, who dismiss this widespread disapproval as merely a product of ‘left-leaning’ historiography.⁵² Yet from late 1950 political and popular opinion was wary of expanding the war any further and unpredictable, bellicose characters who could spark a wider war (like Macarthur and Rhee) were criticized by both the political left and right. In 1953, suspicion of Rhee increased still further as in June he allowed North Korean prisoners to escape, destabilising already fragile peace negotiations.⁵³ The Member of Parliament Kenneth Younger (1908–1976), who had been Acting Foreign Secretary during the early stages of the war due to the illness of Ernest Bevin, said in the Commons: ‘It is very tragic that, after a truce has been held up ... for some two years through the intransigence of the Communist side about relatively unimportant matters, it should now be in danger owing to the fanaticism of Syngman Rhee and his failure to understand why United Nations is in Korea at all.’⁵⁴ A report in *The Times* characterised Rhee’s move as ‘the Korean tail ... wagging the United Nations dog.’⁵⁵ Elsewhere, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) received impassioned letters from Trades Council from across the country calling for it to deplore Rhee’s actions.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Montague Smith, ‘Macarthur, man of today’, *Daily Mail*, 28 June 1950, 4.

⁵⁰ Macdonald, *Britain and the Korean War*, 48–50.

⁵¹ Anonymous, ‘General MacArthur relieved of all commands’, *The Times*, 12 April 1951; Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War*, 225.

⁵² Macdonald, *Korea*, 84; Allan R. Millett, ‘The Korean War: a 50-year critical historiography’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 24, 1 (2001), 190–1; Max Hastings, ‘The Coldest Winter’, *Sunday Times*, 10 August 2008.

⁵³ Anonymous, ‘N.U.R. rebuke for Syngman Rhee’, *Dundee Courier*, 10 July 1953; David Low, ‘Prisoners in Korea’, *Manchester Guardian*, 23 June 1953.

⁵⁴ *Parliamentary Debates* (Commons), 518, 22 July 1953, 384–515.

⁵⁵ Special Correspondent, ‘U.N. dilemma of persistent S. Korean defiance’, *The Times*, 22 June 1953, 6.

⁵⁶ Modern Records Centre (MRC), Trade Union Congress Papers, MSS 292/951.9/2.

Yet despite these concerns, the social impact of the war was somewhat limited, particularly as the war went on. Winston Churchill famously quipped that he had ‘never heard of the bloody place till... [he] was seventy-four.’⁵⁷ Tony Shaw explains how the British Foreign Office faced a difficult task in explaining involvement to the wider public, as most people felt that ‘Britain had no economic or strategic interest in Korea’.⁵⁸ A Foreign Office document, sent to Attlee in 1950, noted that Korea was ‘remote’ and the threat posed by its instability was ‘indirect and not immediate.’⁵⁹ In one BBC programme aired on 26 June 1950, the presenter stated that ‘the outbreak of fighting in Korea has come as a very unpleasant suprise [*sic*] to the British and United States governments’.⁶⁰ Another programme stated that ‘[v]ery few people on that Sunday morning were quite sure exactly where Korea was’.⁶¹ It was stated that the war had not been planned, but that it was necessary for the protection of democracy. However, another programme (aired in September 1950) explained the principle of Communist interference in the Korean conflict: ‘[At the] back of all this lies the clash between the intolerant and uncompromising ideology of the Communists ... and the very different views of the Western nations, anxious to preserve the freedom to live their lives’.⁶² These motivations were echoed in other films at the time, such as the Crown Film Unit *Men of the World* (1950), where the British soldier was seen as the bulwark against ‘the threatening years’ in which Britain now finds itself.⁶³ It is important to note, however, that in-depth programmes on Korea were largely restricted to the early months of the conflict: subsequent reports (by the BBC and companies such as Pathé News) were prompted only by particular campaigns such as the infamous Battle of the Imjin River in April 1951 and by the truce in 1953 (programming for which the BBC had been discussing since early 1952).⁶⁴ By 1952, as one *Daily Mail*

⁵⁷ Martin Gilbert, *‘Never Despair’: Winston Churchill 1945-1965* (London, 1988), 861.

⁵⁸ Tony Shaw, ‘The Information Research Department of the British Foreign Office and the Korean War, 1950–53’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 34, 2 (1999), 265.

⁵⁹ Bodleian Library, Attlee Papers, Foreign Office memorandum ‘Korea’, c. July 1950, MS Attlee 103.7.

⁶⁰ BBC, S Series (Television), ‘Korean news flash’, 26 June 1950, S322/85/1.

⁶¹ BBC, Home News and Entertainment, ‘The story of the Korean War’, 1953, R19/1233.

⁶² BBC, Home News and Entertainment, ‘Korea in world politics’, 8 September 1950, S322/85/1.

⁶³ *Men of the World* (dir. Ronald Clark, Crown Film Unit, 1950).

⁶⁴ BBC, T Series (talks), Letter from William F. Henson to Norman Swallow (BBC Television Service), 5 February 1952, T32/224.

editorial noted, the Korean War had largely become a ‘slumbering war’: it was being forgotten, even before the end of the war.⁶⁵

But how did British people themselves respond to these media representations? Mass Observation (MO) surveys conducted in the summer and autumn of 1950 are a helpful, if imperfect, indicator of popular feeling. On one level, these surveys are potentially one of the first lenses onto attitudes toward conflict in post-1945 Britain.⁶⁶ Moreover, James Hinton argues that although to some extent ‘unrepresentative’, MO responses can show how individuals conceptualise both themselves and ‘more general historical processes’.⁶⁷ Claire Langhamer too states that at its best MO responses are ‘richly imbued with the popular as well as individual memories’.⁶⁸ So although MO responses are far from uncomplicated, unmediated glimpses into people’s lives, they *can* provide examples of how individuals think of themselves within large-scale historical contexts like the Cold War. There are numerous examples upon which we might draw. Whilst some people saw Korea as a civil war on a distant peninsula, many people debated whether the Korean War would be ‘world war three’, with most concluding it would not as ‘Russia is not ready yet’. Many of those surveyed still felt that ‘old Joe Stalin’ was behind the troubles. One man argued that: ‘I don’t see why we should be talking of a war so soon after the last. All these young fellows they’ve only just got back into Civvy Street [and] they want to settle down to a home and family – they don’t want to be involved in another war[.] ... [I]t’s none of our business.’ Another man agreed, noting that: ‘Myself I’ve been thro[ugh] two wars, I’ve had enough. As far as the present situation goes – we should have left it alone’. Although Edgerton has dismissed the idea that Britain was a ‘weary titan’ in the immediate post-war years, the MO surveys illustrate some degree of war weariness or a desire to ‘settle down’. A significant number of respondents (both male and female) claimed that women were particularly concerned about another war. One woman in Victoria stated that:

⁶⁵ Anonymous, ‘The war wakes up’, *Daily Mail*, 25 June 1952, 1.

⁶⁶ All material from Mass Observation Archives (MOA), Public Opinions of the Korean War, June - July 1950, 9-1-A; News Quota Survey public attitudes to Korean War, July 1950, 9-1-B.

⁶⁷ Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives*, 17.

⁶⁸ Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love: the Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution* (Oxford, 2013), xviii.

All the women round our way are ... worrying what it’ll all turn to, after all we’ve been through and the young fellows just growing up after living in shelters and evacuation[.] ... They’re frightened to look ahead; they’re just getting things nice and ‘straight’ and they want to live in peace and quiet – no woman wants any more war.

Several other respondents noted that it was ‘the women who were taking it worst.’ Although the MO survey represents only a small sample, these comments nevertheless show the domestic context in which the Korean War took place, particularly the prevailing discourse over gendered citizenship. Lucy Noakes and Susan Grayzel have argued that citizenship remained persistently gendered in the twentieth century and split along ‘passive’ and ‘active’ lines – ‘with women and children largely as victims and men as defenders of the home’.⁶⁹ Civil defence in the early Cold War replicated these ideas, focusing on ‘women and children first’ in domestic strategies of evacuation and protection. This language did change later (albeit only slightly) with the activism of campaigns against nuclear weapons later in the Cold War.⁷⁰ Korea was therefore not a turning point in this respect.

Nevertheless, these surveys testify to the enduring legacy of the Second World War in shaping – and eclipsing – experiences of Korea. Even in early 1950, the possibility of ‘total war’ was widely discussed among MO respondents and some presumed, like the female respondent in Victoria, that the war would be fought in the skies above London once more. The potential use of nuclear weapons, mooted by Macarthur before his dismissal in April 1951, added a further layer of anxiety. One woman from Fulham stated that: ‘We haven’t forgotten the last war and this one will be worse still with the Atom Bomb’. One respondent linked this to the US: ‘It is a disgrace: the Americans will have England blown to smithereens [.] ... We’re the stooges of America.’ References to the atom bomb were frequent, but many dismissed its threat arguing that it will never be used. Furthermore, once it became clear that nuclear war was not going to be unleashed, much of the concern dissipated. Although no comparable

⁶⁹ Lucy Noakes and Susan Grayzel, ‘Defending the homeland: gendering civil defence from the First World War to the “War on Terror”’, in Ana Carden-Coyne (ed.), *Gender and Conflict since 1914: Historical and Interdisciplinary Approaches* (New York and Basingstoke, 2012), 31.

⁷⁰ Matthew Grant, *After the Bomb: Civil Defence and Nuclear War in Cold War Britain, 1945–68*, (New York and Basingstoke, 2010), 62 and 143; James Stafford, “‘Stay at home’: the politics of nuclear civil defence, 1968–83”, *Twentieth Century British History*, 23, 3 (2012), 383–407.

MO data exists any later than autumn 1950, Kynaston has noted that news of the Korean War was even eclipsed by August with the birth of Princess Anne.⁷¹ After an initial period of fear, there were fewer references to Korea in national newspapers and the Houses of Parliament: even in July 1950, the MO surveys stated that there was no increase in newspaper sales (as typically happened in wartime).⁷² One veteran later stated that even in 1952, he was already ‘beginning to feel like a forgotten soldier from a forgotten war.’⁷³ In the same year Christine Knowles, founder of a fund for British prisoners of war which had been running since 1918, proclaimed angrily in a newspaper interview that she had “‘never known times when men were fighting when so little has been done for them by the people at home’”.⁷⁴

Not all British people were apathetic. Certain regions, especially those associated with particular regiments such as the Middlesex Regiment (the ‘Diehards’) or the Gloucestershire Regiment (the ‘Glorious Glosters’, many of whom were taken prisoner in April 1951) continued to run ‘local boy’ features.⁷⁵ Korea also prompted *opposition*, particularly from the British Communist organizations, trade unions and leading left-wing academics. Regarding the capture of Seoul in 1950 by the US, E.P. Thompson wrote in one satirical poem ‘[s]o many souls were liberated on that day/ Out of their cage of skin and freed into the airs./ It is curious that a buzzard ate the speeches/ And odd that flies should have blown on the prayers.’⁷⁶ Anti-Americanism was rife in intellectual circles in the 1950s. Criticising their Cold War stance in a poem entitled ‘Cold Warrior’ published by the *Labour Monthly* in 1950, James Aldridge wrote: ‘Listen America;/ Death is a braggart/ In their apple-pie hands, and/Liberty is beggared/at their milk-fed lips.’⁷⁷ It was not only intellectual circles that prompted opposition: the TUC received over sixty letters in the last year of the war alone from Trades Councils, calling on it to take a firmer stance opposing American and South Korean handling of the war.⁷⁸ Yet there were many people, from the Cabinet to Mass Observation respondents, who felt that the war was part of Britain’s

⁷¹ Kynaston, *Austerity Britain*, 534.

⁷² MOA, Public Opinions of the Korean War, June - July 1950, 9-1-A.

⁷³ IWM, Papers of Jim Jacobs, unpublished memoir, c. 2001, Docs. 9870, 190.

⁷⁴ Special Correspondent, ‘Britain’s “forgotten army” in Korea: public apathy deplored by head of welfare fund’, *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Mercury*, 11 November 1952.

⁷⁵ Anonymous, ‘God speed’, *The Citizen*, 3 October 1950; Anonymous, ‘Three qualities’, *The Citizen*, 28 April 1952; National Army Museum (NAM), Clippings 1950-1 (Middlesex), NAM. 1999-11-189-22.

⁷⁶ E.P. Thompson, *Infant and Emperor: Poems for Christmas* (London, 1983), 11-12.

⁷⁷ James Aldridge, ‘Cold warrior’, in Labour Monthly Editorial Board (ed.), ‘Korea handbook,’ *Labour Monthly*, 1950, 61.

⁷⁸ Modern Records Centre, Trade Union Congress Papers, MSS 292/951.9/2.

continuing *duty*. In a news response survey of July 1950, the majority of respondents felt that it was ‘right’ that the US was involved in Korea, even if they feared the consequences.⁷⁹ One respondent even noted that ‘they are not doing any more than we are doing in Malaya or Greece.’ This argument is corroborated by Kynaston, who cites a 1950 Gallup poll which found that 78 per cent of respondents supported increased defence expenditure.⁸⁰ The British serviceman still represented the maintenance of international law and the British ‘common will to order’. In this way, the Korean War was no different from what had come before: it merely substantiated, rather than changed, widely-held views about Britain’s military duties and capabilities.⁸¹

So despite its economic and political importance, the Korean War failed to fully capture public attention beyond the summer of 1950, contributing to a growing sense among servicemen that they had been forgotten. As noted, this was compounded by Britain’s junior role in the war and by the general lack of knowledge about the peninsula. Yet the overshadowing effect of the Second World War, evident in MO responses, is also an indication of the function of forgetting in post-war societies, as set out by Enloe and Connerton. The Korean War, occurring immediately after the Second World War, coincided with a period of concerted identity formation in Britain, where certain ‘images’ or events were more attractive than others. Korea’s inability to fit within established narratives of British identity and self-conception is thus key to understanding its forgotten status across the second half of the twentieth century.

Forgetting Korea

There were several key stages in this process. The first was the end of the conflict in 1953. An uneasy armistice agreement was signed on 27 July at Panmunjom following years of negotiations, after diplomats settled the main point of contention – the destination of repatriated prisoners of war. The US

⁷⁹ MOA, News Quota Survey public attitudes to Korean War, July 1950, 9-1-B. Of 152 respondents, 49.34 per cent supported the US approach, 16.45 per cent felt it was not ‘right’ and the remainder did not wish to comment or were unclear.

⁸⁰ Edgerton, *Warfare State*, 5; Kynaston, *Austerity Britain*, 548.

⁸¹ Journalist Andrew Roth argued that the ‘armed ground soldier is still in the decisive force in modern warfare’; see Bishopsgate Institute Library, Andrew Roth Papers, Andrew Roth, ‘Persia turns the military scales’, 15 September 1950, ROTH/3/20.

did not wish to force its Korean prisoners to return to a Communist state if they did not want to, but the Chinese insisted that all prisoners return to their own countries, as set out by the Geneva Convention. Tensions eased in 1953: Macdonald argues that the key driver behind reinvigorated talks that summer was the death of Stalin in March 1953.⁸² The truce was intended to be the first step to a more stable political solution, but talks on reunification in Geneva in 1954 broke down and Korea remains to this day a highly volatile region. Charles S. Young argues that the undistinguished military record of the US in Korea (the UN were ‘twice in danger of being driven into the sea’) led it to its lack of remembrance in American popular culture.⁸³ More significantly, the unclear aims of the war and the frequent stalling of peace talks from 1951 meant that the armistice was not celebrated, despite the fact it marked a major concession for Communist China over ‘voluntary repatriation’.⁸⁴ As Young argues ‘Washington was left with very little salvage for a usable past.’⁸⁵

Likewise, the unclear ending of the conflict did little to integrate the war into British narratives of conflict. Added to this was the feeling that Britain had only played a subsidiary role at best. In July 1953, Member of Parliament Walter Eliot summarised the situation: ‘This has been a great war in which we have not played the major part. Such a thing is almost unknown[.]... Let us not take up a self-righteous position. Nothing annoys us more than to find other people, who have not suffered as much as we, coming forward ... and giving us wonderful advice about how things should now be arranged.’⁸⁶ Korea was not seen as part of Britain’s ‘usable past’ or a positive sign for its future. Nor was this sentiment limited just to policymakers. On 31 July 1953, *Bury Free Press* reported the bemusement with which the citizens of Bury St. Edmunds viewed the UN flag flying above the council offices, marking the end of the war. The reporter lamented that it all seemed ‘so remote’ and that Britain’s long-awaited Ashes victory in 1953 gained more attention: ‘What a scathing commentary upon the times in

⁸² Macdonald, *Britain and the Korean War*, 92.

⁸³ Charles S. Young, ‘POWs: the hidden reason for forgetting Korea’ in Robert Barnes (ed.), *The Korean War at Sixty: New Approaches to the Study of the Korean War* (Abingdon, 2012), 156.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁸⁶ *Parliamentary Debates* (Commons) 518, 30 July 1953, 1547-610.

which we live! For what was true of West Suffolk was true also of the country as a whole. The forgotten war ...[has] come to an almost unnoticed end.’⁸⁷

Even more significant was the process of memorialization of the Second World War underway in the 1950s. As both James Hinton and Michael Paris have argued, the Second World War’s legacy became central to the national narrative to the extent that it eclipsed subsequent conflicts in popular culture.⁸⁸ In the early 1950s the image of the Second World War was solidifying as a morally unimpeachable conflict, where Britain had ‘stood alone’ in 1940 and eventually conquered tyranny. The liberation of the Nazi concentration camps at Buchenwald and, in particular, Bergen-Belsen cemented this narrative during the late 1940s and 1950s.⁸⁹ By the late twentieth century, as Judt points out, such events and names had been solidified as a ‘pedagogically serviceable Historical Chamber of Horrors’.⁹⁰ Korea coincided with the start of this process. During the Korean War, younger servicemen referred to the experiences of Second World War soldiers, compared to their own. Robin Bruford-Davies, an officer taken as a prisoner of war during Korea, mentioned in an oral history interview that his father, who had been a soldier before him and ‘had just finished a war said “right, you must go out with some proper clothes”’, knowing the particular importance of keeping hands and feet warm.⁹¹ The Second World War was still the defining, moral conflict of the era. In a letter to his girlfriend, Valerie Wassell, National Serviceman Keith Taylor wrote: ‘[The] trouble with this war, Val, is this. *There’s no object*. Everything anyone does is normally done for a reason. In the last war it was “Berlin or bust”. Out here what is it? To capture Pyongyang, the capital? ... What? No one knows, except something called vaguely the peace of the world and what does that mean to the average soldier? Nothing at all.’⁹²

There was even concern during the war amongst senior officers that servicemen needed more guidance in the war’s aims. Macarthur’s successor General Ridgway asked for a memorandum to be read to all allied servicemen in January 1951 entitled ‘Why We Are Here’. The memorandum reiterated

⁸⁷ Anonymous, ‘The war which was forgotten in excitement of the Test Match’, *Bury Free Press*, 31 July 1953, 1.

⁸⁸ Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives*, 1; Michael Paris, *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850–2000* (London, 2000), 221.

⁸⁹ Joanne Reilly, *Belsen: the Liberation of a Camp* (London, 1998), 1.

⁹⁰ Judt, *Reappraisals*, 4.

⁹¹ NAM, Oral History Interview by David Smurthwaite, Robin Bruford-Davies, 10 February 1989, NAM 1989-05-163.

⁹² Keith Taylor to Valerie Wassell, 2 September 1951, in Anthony Perrins (ed.), *‘A Pretty Rough Do Altogether’: the Fifth Fusiliers in Korea, 1950–1951* (Alnwick, 2004), 188.

that servicemen were fighting for societal, political and even religious values which underpinned collective Western society.⁹³ Chief of the Imperial General Staff William Slim (1891–1970) emphasised this message to returning soldiers from Korea:

[Y]ou earned the admiration, not only of your own country and of all Nations fighting in Korea, but the hearty respect of the enemy[.] ... Most important of all you have helped to strike a blow in the defence of the free world which has, I think, done much to lessen the likelihood of further wars. You’ve done something to be proud of; be proud of it.⁹⁴

Yet when Benjamin Welles of the *New York Times* was asked on the BBC radio programme *London Forum* what the aims of the Korean conflict were he commented: ‘I think the average G.I. has no objective in mind[.] ... I think that the senior officers and the political leaders of the United States have one stated objective, and that is to repel the aggression of North Korea at least as far as the 38 Parallel.’⁹⁵ It was not surprising too that the British public failed to rally around this war aim and Korea became ‘forgotten’ in the canon of twentieth-century conflict.

More broadly, this ambiguity demonstrates the uneasy position of the Cold War itself in British national narratives. Peter Hennessey points out that the Cold War was never a ‘people’s war’.⁹⁶ Nor was this just because of the smaller numbers involved as numbers of soldiers on the ground do not necessarily transpose into enduring public memory. In post-war Germany, for instance, 63,000 British servicemen were stationed in 1951 alone, yet British involvement never became a central feature of British self-identity.⁹⁷ Britain’s unclear relationship with its Cold War commitments was summed up by one commentator in 1971, who wrote that ‘deterrence can be boring, as much for the public in Britain as for the soldiers and airmen’.⁹⁸

⁹³ IWM, Papers of Lieutenant R.S. Gill, Memorandum by HQ Eighth Army United States Army Korea (EUSAK), ‘Why We Are Here’, 21 January 1951, Docs 13204.

⁹⁴ IWM, Papers of Lieutenant R.S. Gill, Personal Message from Field Marshall Sir William Slim, November 1951, Docs 13204.

⁹⁵ BBC, Scripts, London Forum, ‘What Are Our Aims in the Korean fighting?’, 9 July 1950, B/C GOS 6/8/50.

⁹⁶ Peter Hennessey, *The Secret State: Whitehall and the Cold War* (London, 2003), 2.

⁹⁷ Vinen, *National Service*, 286.

⁹⁸ Gordon Lee, *The Half-Forgotten Army: the British Forces in Germany* (London, 1971), 1.

Neither, as the years went by, did the Korean War speak to contemporary trends or conflicts. Even during the early 1960s, Korea was being regarded as the prelude to Vietnam, the latter conflict becoming steadily more unpopular during the early 1970s.⁹⁹ At the time of the Falklands War in the early 1980s, for example, Margaret Thatcher’s government appropriated the memory of the Second World War, promoting military endeavour and “duty” as part of resurgent nationalism. Korean veterans were profoundly aware of their exclusion from such rhetoric. The Falklands War coincided with the retirement of many veterans, a time which, psychologist Nigel Hunt argues, leads to greater reflection on military service and trauma.¹⁰⁰ It also coincided with the first large-scale oral history projects with Korean War veterans, such as the National Army Museum’s ‘Project Korea’ in the late 1980s. Both the Second World War and the Falklands are constant reference points in these interviews. Jarlath Donnellan was proud to mention how the model of machine gun he used in Korea was also used in the Falklands.¹⁰¹ Veterans also highlighted the difference between the popular reception of the Falklands War and the Korean War. Jim Jacobs asked at the end of his memoir: ‘will the public at large retain an interest? ... Like Korea, will the Falklands and [the] Gulf have faded from public memory all by excepting those who will proudly proclaim, “I was there, that was my war”.’¹⁰² The Falklands War made Korea’s omission even more stark to its veterans, who had by that time begun to reflect on their experiences and found a British public seemingly disinterested in the cause for which they had fought.

Writing the Forgotten War: Veteran Life-Writing

For the servicemen who fought in Korea, however, the war was not easy to forget. Derek Halley wrote in his memoir:

I remember the forgotten war. Disraeli was wrong: if time were the ‘great physician’ I would have forgotten long ago. But who was he, anyway? Just another politician who never

⁹⁹ Arthur Cook, ‘Vietnam: it’s now or never for the US’, *Daily Mail*, 26 November 1964, 2.

¹⁰⁰ Nigel C. Hunt, *Memory, War and Trauma* (Cambridge and New York, 2010), 149.

¹⁰¹ NAM, Oral History Interview by unnamed interviewer, Jarlath Donnellan, 4 August 1988, NAM 1989-05-160.

¹⁰² IWM, Papers of Jim Jacobs, unpublished memoir, c. 2001, Docs. 9870, 191.

saw Korea[.] ... The government may have locked their records away but mine are staring me in the face. I can't forget the madness which savaged more people in three years than Vietnam did in ten.¹⁰³

Paul Fussell has argued that feelings that the domestic world has forgotten its soldiers are fairly common among front-line servicemen.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, Halley's directionless anger at all politicians (even those of the previous century) represents a broader resentment by the Korean War generation at the lack of recognition they received within British memorial and popular culture. The final section of this article addresses how these veterans have written and understood the ‘forgotten war’.

Veterans frequently reference the ‘forgotten war’ motif in their life-writing. National Serviceman Private Russell Edwards wrote in his 2008 unpublished memoir that, until he became involved in the BKVA, his medals lay ‘cast aside in a drawer, forgotten, from a forgotten war’.¹⁰⁵ Others call for the conflict to feature more in political decision-making. Former intelligence officer Anthony Perrins claimed that the ‘forgotten’ status of the Korean War did ‘not make ... [him] unhappy, except that there were those whose selflessness and courage should not go untold; and if the inevitable mistakes made by the politicians and the military are forgotten, they will surely be repeated.’¹⁰⁶ Similarly S.G. Buss noted, in an edited collection on the Korean War, that he would not be angry at the ‘forgotten’ status of the war if it was not for the fact that the same ‘mistakes’ were being made by contemporary governments.¹⁰⁷

There is also potentially another level of forgetting at work. If we return to Ron Larby's statement that the ‘Korean War never happened’, on the surface this corroborates Halley's reading of Korea as a forgotten war. But when reading Larby's statement we are also reminded powerfully of Jean Baudrillard's argument that the Gulf War ‘did not take place’. Baudrillard argued that the conflict in fact primarily took place through hackneyed media representations and clichés of war. The ‘fake and

¹⁰³ Derek Halley, *The Iron Claw: A Conscript's Tale* (Angus, 1998), 9.

¹⁰⁴ Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behaviour in the Second World War* (New York and Oxford, 1989), 267-8.

¹⁰⁵ IWM, Russell Frederick Edwards, unpublished memoir, May 2008, Docs. 19562, 50.

¹⁰⁶ Perrins, ‘*A Pretty Rough Do Altogether*’, 337.

¹⁰⁷ S.G. Buss, ‘The forgotten war’ in Reuben Holroyd (ed.), *Poetry of the Korean War* (Halifax, 2003), 74.

presumptive warriors, generals, experts and television presenters’ used familiar ideas to ‘signify’ the event of the war. This meant that the conflict in the Gulf had ‘been anticipated in all its details and exhausted by all the scenarios’.¹⁰⁸ The memory of the Second World War on the Korean War generation meant that every action of *theirs* had also been anticipated, and it was thus overlooked, its unique characteristics forgotten. In this way, the Korean War ‘never happened’.

Perhaps Baudrillard’s claim that war takes place through media representations as much as it does on the battlefield can be seen in Korean War veterans’ awareness of the *textual* tradition in which they were writing. Veteran Anthony Perrins lamented that ‘no Robert Graves, Wilfred Owen, or Siegfried Sassoon has emerged. Neither has a Pat Barker, Sebastian Faulks or Louis de Bernières been inspired to write of life in Korea during the period.’¹⁰⁹ Similarly, upon his return home, Norman Davies commented on the discomfort he felt compared to his military-literary forebears: ‘Being an avid reader it seemed to me that fictional characters, when they arrived home from a distant land or a distant war, enthused over the journey as they neared their homes and their loved ones. So what was the matter with me?’¹¹⁰ There was an *expectation* that servicemen would tell their stories and that society would listen and respond. For instance, some servicemen in Korea made specific reference to Sassoon and Graves in their letters and writing.¹¹¹ But there are few memorials to the Korean War, still fewer novels and films. The only British film, *A Hill in Korea* (1954), starred a young Michael Caine, fresh back from Korea himself.¹¹² The most famous and mocked fictional veteran of the Korean War – Basil Fawlty – has his experience in Korea summarily dismissed in one episode of the popular 1970s TV programme *Fawlty Towers*. Basil whispers threatening to his wife Sybil that: ‘I fought the Korean War you know, I killed four men’. Ignoring Basil, Sybil simply says to two passing guests: ‘He was in the Catering Corps – he used to poison them.’¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Jean Baudrillard (trans. Paul Patton), *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington, 1995), 31 and 35.

¹⁰⁹ Perrins, ‘*A Pretty Rough Do Altogether*’, 338.

¹¹⁰ Norman Davies, *Red Winds from the North* (Knebworth, 1999), 150.

¹¹¹ IWM, Papers of Second Lieutenant J Whybrow, Unpublished Memoir, Docs. 12723, 4; Letter to parents, 17 August 1952, Docs. 12723.

¹¹² Simon Kent (Max Catto) *A Hill in Korea* (Watford, 1954); *A Hill in Korea* (dir. Julian Amyes, Wessex Film, 1956).

¹¹³ *Fawlty Towers* (BBC Two, 3 October 1975).

Faced with this apparent apathy, the Korean War veteran community have taken up the mantle of the ‘forgotten war’ as a way of defining themselves. Anthony Farrar-Hockley, a former British army officer taken captive in Korea, addressed a BKVA group in 2000, saying that although they were forgotten, they had followed orders and fought for what was ‘right’.¹¹⁴ Just as Connerton argues that forgetting can be ‘constitutive in the formation of a new identity’, so too can *being* forgotten. This was particularly true for National Servicemen: Vinen states that Korea quickly acquired a reputation as a ‘uniquely unattractive posting’ and even for those who did not go, the war had led extended all conscripts’ time in the forces.¹¹⁵ Forgotten on a national level, the war retained and even gained a special significance for veterans, regimental and National Service organisations.

Conclusion

It was against this background of apathy that servicemen explored their experiences in Korea. The Korean War had seemingly ‘not happened’, although not in the Baudrillardian sense of a media outpouring obscuring the actual conflict. In fact the opposite was true: the public’s apparent apathy meant that the war had not been reproduced or represented *enough*. Television, so integral to public history, similarly overlooked the Korean War. Max Hastings presented the BBC programme *The War in Korea* (January 1988) and historian Bruce Cumings produced Channel 4’s *Korea: the Unknown War* (July 1988).¹¹⁶ Yet these two programmes were insufficient in publicly remembering the Korean War: for instance, *The Unknown War* only had 669,000 viewers for the first programme (compared with eight million who had watched the first episode of *The Great War* in 1964 or 2.6 million who watched *Testament of Youth* in 1979).¹¹⁷ Despite an outpouring of military-related programmes on British television, Korea has remained ‘forgotten’ across media forms.

¹¹⁴ Dedication of BKVA Memorial, Staffordshire, 27 July 2000 [VHS], NAM 2000-11-41.

¹¹⁵ Vinen, *National Service*, 291.

¹¹⁶ *The War in Korea* (prod. John Gau, January 1988); *Korea: the Unknown War* (prod. Philip Whitehead, July 1988); Bruce Cumings, *War and Television* (London and New York, 1992), 231-67.

¹¹⁷ Cumings, *War and Television*, 236; Todman, *The Great War*, 30 and 184.

In the 1950s, the Korean War coincided with a post-war society seeking to fashion its identity in the wake of the Second World War and for later generations its inconclusive narrative fell outside Britain’s ‘usable past’. Will this change in the twenty-first century? In recent years, Korea has featured more in remembrance celebrations than it did for much of the twentieth century. Notably, Korean War veterans took a high profile role in Armistice Day commemorations in Whitehall on 11 November 2013. Prompted by the anniversary of the ceasefire at Panmunjom (and the passing of the World War generations), veterans were invited to march past the Cenotaph: five hundred veterans, the largest group on the day, took part. The following year, the first London memorial was unveiled to the Korean War on Victoria Embankment.



Illustration 1: Korean War Memorial, London. Photograph by the author, 2016.

But the conflict has yet to occupy a dominant position in national memorial culture and, as this article has shown in tracing the genealogy of the Korean War in British society and culture, forgetting

still *matters* to Korea’s veterans. It serves either as a rallying point of common identity with other veterans, or as label to rail against. In 2012, the Royal Horticultural Society Chelsea Flower Show Best in Show was awarded to Jihae Hwang for ‘Quiet Time: DMZ Forbidden Garden’. BKVA organiser Alan Guy declared that ‘[t]he final chapter of this story is that the Korean War has been brought to the attention of the public via television, the radio and the Internet and ... [Jihae Hwang’s] team are to be commended for their fine effort to make sure that “We are NOT Forgotten”.’¹¹⁸ Whether this ‘final chapter’ is enough to integrate the Korean War into British culture and society after half a century of oversight remains, at present, unlikely.

¹¹⁸ Alan Guy, ‘The Royal Horticultural Show’, *Morning Calm*, 67 (2012), 3.